

Ageing John Banville: from Einstein to Bergson¹

O Tempo em John Banville: de Einstein a Bergson

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Abstract: *There is a clear engagement with theories of time across Banville's oeuvre, from his earliest published work through to the twenty-first-century novels. I explore how, in their engagement with age and ageing, Banville's characters adopt and interrogate Albert Einstein's and Henri Bergson's competing ideas of the present and the passage of time, sliding from favouring the former to prioritising the latter. Martin Heidegger's conception of Dasein, a Being-toward-death, allows me to explore how Banville's characters evoke either Einstein's spacetime and series of nows, or Bergson's psychologised Duration (Durée). This is borne out in Gabriel Godkin's subverted and anti-atavistic narrative in Birchwood (1973), the battle over authenticity between Copernicus and Rheticus in Doctor Copernicus (1976), and how Hermes controls the mortals' time and tries his best to age in The Infinities (2009). I conclude that Banville's characters' evolving preference for Bergsonian over Einsteinian tropes indicates an acceptance and happy engagement with the ageing process.*

Keywords: *ageing; John Banville; Henri Bergson; Birchwood; Doctor Copernicus; Albert Einstein; The Infinities; temporality.*

Resumo: *Há um claro envolvimento com as teorias do tempo na obra de Banville como um todo, desde em seus primeiros livros publicados até nos romances do século XXI. Considerando os conceitos de idade e envelhecimento, exploro como os personagens de Banville adotam e interrogam as ideias concorrentes de Albert Einstein e Henri Bergson sobre o presente e a passagem do tempo, deixando de favorecer o primeiro e priorizando o segundo. A concepção de Martin Heidegger de Dasein, um Ser em direção à morte, permite-me explorar como os personagens de Banville evocam a relação espaço-tempo de Einstein e séries de "agoras", ou a Duração psicologizada de Bergson (Durée). Isso é confirmado na narrativa subvertida e anti-atávica de Gabriel Godkin em Birchwood (1973), na batalha pela autenticidade entre Copernicus e Rheticus em Doctor Copernicus (1976), e na forma como Hermes controla o tempo dos mortais e tenta o seu melhor para envelhecer em The Infinities (2009). Concluo que a preferência crescente dos personagens de Banville pelos tropos bergsonianos e einsteinianos indica uma aceitação e um envolvimento bem-sucedido com o processo de envelhecimento.*

Palavras-chave: *Envelhecimento; John Banville; Henri Bergson; Birchwood; Doctor Copernicus; Albert Einstein; The Infinities; temporalidade.*

*[Y]et I was the very one who would break time's arrow
and discard the slackened bow.
Old Adam Godley in The Infinities (215)*

John Banville has recently proclaimed Albert Einstein “as famous today as he was when his theory of relativity first set the public’s imagination alight”, confirming him as the “greatest scientist since Newton”. Banville also describes Henri Bergson, a contemporary of Einstein, in opposing terms: “Yet who now reads Bergson, apart from a few lonely specialists?” (2016: paras 1–2). This is not just a historical observation for Banville, but I believe an ironic and personal one, too. In considering age and ageing in John Banville’s writing, I will be explaining the shift in emphasis from an Einsteinian “expanded present” in which universal time is observed singly and even contradictorily by separate observers, to a Bergsonian “Duration”, in which ageing is an intuitively felt experience. I contend that as Banville ages, his characters too develop a greater appreciation for ageing, fearing it less and enjoying the experience of the passage of time. I will show that Banville’s characters develop a consolidation of temporality as defined and characterised by science, all the while evolving an anti-ageing writing system. In these analyses, Martin Heidegger, Einstein and Bergson will be important as they consider the conundrum of time as experienced psychologically or described scientifically—the division that Einstein used to characterise his differences from Bergson (Scott 2008. 188). This philosophical turn is encouraged in Banville’s *The Infinities* (2009). Ventriloquised through old Adam Godley’s thoughts are a set of contradictory “times”, with old Adam wondering “why” time “var[ies]”. He thinks a “flow” and “an unbreaking wave” against a “great stillness, stretching everywhere” (Banville 2010. 70–1). These twin poles are representative of both Bergson’s *durée*, Duration, and Einstein’s spacetime. These ideas are enhanced by reading Heidegger’s philosophy. I have chosen time as my subject because when we think about ageing, and when we encounter ageing either in ourselves or others, we leave “the big world and [enter] into the dark underground of our selves” (Banville 1985. para. 5) where we are confronted by the nature of time. This is ultimately a philosopho-metaphorical inquiry, dispensing with Einstein’s hard science and thinking through the ontological consequences of scientists’ experiments. Banville’s novels become those consequences, with their characters exploring how time is not singular and is irreducibly contestable. This is not a quotation-spotting exercise, noting Mark Currie’s warning that literary criticism about time should avoid scrutinising only those texts that explicitly quote theorists of time (140). I will show that the apparent tension between Bergson’s Duration and Einsteinian spacetime correlates with Banville’s changing representations of ageing. Following a theoretical sketch, I follow Banville’s ideas chronologically in *Birchwood*, *Doctor Copernicus*, and *The Infinities*.

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Time was a constant source of interest throughout the twentieth century for scientists and philosophers, though fluctuating in its nature. Newton’s earlier theories relied on a fixed state called “space”. Within the limits of this space, time could flow uniformly and unidirectionally towards the future. This theory was cemented in the early twentieth century by British astronomer Arthur Eddington who, engaging with the Second Law of Thermodynamics – that entropy in any body is inevitable – described the asymmetrical state of time: entropy ramifies in the future, the direction of travel of the arrow of time, but it is limited in the past. Eddington concludes that entropy is only verifiable as we journey into the future, and since entropy is a law of physics, we must all be travelling into the future. This confirms the process of human ageing.

Einstein, however, challenged these ideas, ruining “many reputations [...] Eddington’s name among them” (Banville 1985. para. 2). In his theory of special relativity, Einstein accounted for the speed of light being constant regardless of the observer (their own speed relative to light is ineffective). He theorised that as a traveller approaches the speed of light, space must shrink to accommodate the high-speed travel. However, when the traveller returns to the departure point to re-join her observer, the time experienced by the traveller will be less than her observer, with time having dilated accordingly. The traveller will now be younger. Einstein famously explained this theory through a thought experiment on identical twins. The logic of the twins paradox appears in Banville’s *The Infinities* (2009) when young Adam Godley considers his mother:

[O]nly he does not think she is like a mother at all. She is absurdly young [...] and seems all the time to be getting younger, or at least not older, so that he has the worrying sensation of steadily catching up on her. She too appears to be aware of this phenomenon, and to find it not at all strange. (2010. 7)

Whilst Banville’s writing allows for emotional consequences of time dilation, for now note the revolution that Einstein’s theories had begun in scientific theory: time was no longer homogeneous, and space no longer neutral. Instead, a density called “spacetime” had been discovered, in which humans are agents and not just passive passengers. Spacetime exists in four dimensions and, were humans able to “see” the fourth dimension as humans “see” three dimensions, we would be able to see time happening all at once, in every space and at every time. Thus, the immortal narrator of *The Infinities*, Hermes, is able to see and narrate all time at any one instant.

Einstein’s theories were not universally accepted. In an unplanned meeting of minds in 1922, Einstein met Bergson, the famed French philosopher whose ideas on *durée* (Duration), Intuition and *élan vital* (life force) had made critical waves in philosophy. Bergson summarised Duration in “Introduction to Metaphysics” (1934):

[Time is] the unrolling of a spool, for there is no living being who does not feel himself coming little by little to the end of his span; and living consists in growing old. But it is just as much a continual winding, like that of thread into a ball, for our past follows us, becoming larger and larger with the present it picks up on its way[.] (1971. 192–3)



Figure 1 Heidegger's depiction of Bergson's spool of time. See Heidegger (1992: 206).

In *The Infinities*, young Adam Godley considers the flow of a river in a Bergsonian way, “thinking, there would be no line or boundary at which the river stops being the river and the estuary starts being the estuary: they would flow into each other”. His sister Petra thinks similarly: “Either [time] drags itself painfully along like something dragging itself in its own slime over bits of twigs and dead leaves on a forest floor, or it speeds past, in jumps and flickers, like the scenes on a spool of film clattering madly through a broken projector” (116). These provide perfect analogies of Duration. Here is the crucial distinction between Einstein and Bergson: one conceives of a spacetime which stills time (albeit in[to] a fourth dimension), whilst the other focuses on flow; Einstein’s is a universal time, whilst Bergson’s is intensely personal or psychological.

Flow versus eternal presentism. Duration versus spacetime. These terms co-ordinate the defining twentieth-century contest between schools of thought about time. Philosophers other than Bergson also had to contend with these issues. Chief among them is Heidegger, in whose philosophy influences from both Einstein and Bergson are visible. For Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927), Dasein (the human in conscious earthly existence) is essentially a Being-toward-death. Moreover, this Being-toward-death exists because at any one moment Dasein conditions temporality. Heidegger explains that Dasein “exists historically and can so exist only because it is temporal in the very basis of its Being” (428). Importantly the three ecstases of temporality – having-been-ness, present-ness and futurity – all exist in and emerge from Dasein at any one time. Elsewhere, Heidegger elaborates that

Expectance implies a being-ahead-of-oneself. [...] This approaching oneself in advance, from one’s own possibility, is the primary ecstatic concept of the future. [...] But this coming-to-oneself does not, as such, stretch over a momentary present of my own; it stretches over the whole of my having-been. [...] T]his having-been-ness temporalizes itself only from out of and in the future. The having-been is not a remnant of myself that has stayed behind and has been left behind by itself. (1992. 205–6)

To illustrate this concept, Heidegger offers the following image (Fig. 2), countering the spools in Bergson’s Duration (Fig. 1).

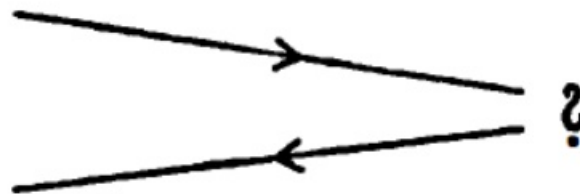


Figure 2 Heidegger's image depicting Dasein's temporality. "This approaching oneself in advance, from one's own possibility, is the primary ecstatic concept of the future [...] (the question mark indicates the horizon that remains open)." (Heidegger 1992. 206)

In contrast to Bergson’s Duration – wherein the past is dragged into the present such that “the novelty of the present moment is precisely the recollection of the immediately preceding moment” (Čapek 127), whilst the future is a distinct category entirely – Heidegger’s Dasein

brings presence to bear upon the world, which contains within it/relies upon both a futurity and having-been-ness. In this framework, ageing is a constant process to which only the authentic Dasein can be attuned, whereas Bergson's Duration is felt by all individuals, regardless of their acuity.

In Heidegger's explanations this time-space represents a place of stillness that simultaneously contains all of Dasein's temporality. This is not dissimilar from Einstein's spacetime, in which all of time and space are available for scrutiny. In both, this now-time emerges from the self. Einstein's reference body (the one making the observations) and Heidegger's Dasein are both selves who, at the moment of temporalizing time – be it, respectively, measuring or paying close attention to oneself in time – are loci for temporality itself, at the point where temporality emerges into the world. For Einstein, this is the “expanded present” (Rovelli 44). For Heidegger (2008) this present is *Der Augenblick*, “That Present which is held in authentic temporality and which thus is *authentic* itself, [and] we call the ‘moment of vision.’” (387) Importantly, Adam Beck (2005) draws attention to the parallels Heidegger himself limns between *Der Augenblick* and the “kind of originality involved in a transformation of the basic concepts during a scientific crisis” (166 and note), such as that inaugurated by Einstein.

Aligning Heidegger with Einstein is not uniformly accepted. David Scott (2006), while acknowledging the influence that both thinkers had on Heidegger's developing conception of time (185), asserts that Heidegger would have sided with Bergson's Duration over Einstein's spacetime. Scott reduces the problem to one of “simultaneity” and Einstein's advancement of (scientific) clock time over lived time (Bergson's Duration and Heidegger's Dasein's temporality). Thus Heidegger's “notion of time as self-extemporizing, as temporalizing of itself is in direct contrast to the conception of time in terms of simultaneity,” writes Scott (184), “and the defining of time in terms of [Einstein's] sequence of ‘nows.’” To reckon time as quantifiable clock time, rather than qualifiable, means to put the cart before the horse, when “Dasein is made present in the making present of the now” (*ibid.* 198). To this end, Scott's Heidegger is much closer to Bergson than Einstein, since Scott's Einstein can only consider ageing as happening in relation to the world which gives to being its age, whereas for Heidegger ageing is a notion that emerges *from* Dasein *into* the world.

Ageing is always a reckoning of the self with the world and with others. However, the manner in which the self–world–others relationship is configured changes according to scientific–philosophical preference. Einstein's “now” is universal but is experienced singly by the observer from their point of reference looking out at the world; whereas for Bergson, the self *feels* time's passage inside themselves. Finally, Heidegger's sense of ageing begins and ends with the self, from whom time emerges into the world. Critically, the notion of “time” is not homogeneous, and this heterogeneity is duly represented across Banville's oeuvre. By understanding the shift in emphasis from one temporal model to another, we are able better to appreciate how Banville's work has developed not only in thematic or stylistic terms, but also in its ontological focus—an argument that has been amply made elsewhere, but never with a focus on time.

Birchwood

In *Birchwood* (1973), aged characters cast a long shadow for the narrator Gabriel. For example, his Granny Godkin “thrashe[s] about under the blankets” when her daughter-in-law wakes her in the morning and she is also a sort of “ogre, [and] her smile was awful, really awful, a sort of

shattered leer [... T]he jaw that I kissed trembled with ague”. This unnerving mix of youthful energy and age leads to her authority – Granny Godkin sits at the head of the table – that cuts memorably into Gabriel’s Imaginary, in contrast with his Mama: “When I try I cannot [...] find any solid shape of her, as I can of Granny Godkin”. Granny Godkin’s solidity is the first indication that in *Birchwood* Banville is engaged with atavism² rather than age and ageing purely. The weaker Granda Godkin is nonetheless an indelible curiosity with a “wizened skull” and “a wicked little old man”. When Granda Godkin is later ill and dying, Gabriel “was made to sit with him, I suppose on the principle that an old man should want the youngest carrier of his name and seed near him at the end” (14, 19, 15, 50–1). By limiting Gabriel’s movements, Granda Godkin’s actions prove atavism’s restrictive nature and the authority of the aged characters.

These figures are in charge of the eponymous Birchwood, the house where the Lawlesses and the Godkins have lived in competition with one another for generations, their “family trees” “ensnarled” (O’Connell 72). The Big House genre, coming to its end when Banville enters the fray in the 1970s,³ is itself ageing along with Birchwood and the elder Godkins. Granda tragically is the first to suffer when he and his son (Gabriel’s father, Papa) try to stop poachers. As a poacher runs from Papa who has tried to shoot him, he clatters into Granda. “The poacher bounced off Granda Godkin,” writes Banville, “stumbled, regained his balance, drew back his arm and smacked him across the side of the head with the pheasant” (46). Whilst they “sewed up Granda Godkin’s ear and bathed his black eye [...] they could do nothing for his maimed brain” (51). This damage has aged Granda Godkin to the point that he no longer seems present with the world. Old Granny Godkin’s own demise is even more dramatic: she spontaneously combusts. Prior to her death, Granny Godkin is as exuberant as ever, and on her way to the summer house “The grin became a skeletal sneer, and she glared about her at the hall”. Gabriel spies the remains of his grandmother’s body: “[T]he ashes on the wall, that rendered purplish mass in the chair, Granny Godkin’s two feet, all that was left of her, in their scorched button boots” (69, 72). Thus the two aged characters who began the narrative as authorities reach their demise by halfway through *Birchwood*, almost as if the Big House itself is rejecting their ancient authority.

Two other key elements accompany these deaths. The first is the coterminous demise of the Big House itself. In Granda Godkin’s case, the poacher attacks him moments after Papa has accidentally shot the house. Similarly, when Granny Godkin combusts “The room shook. There was no sound, but instead a sensation of some huge thing crumpling, like a gargantuan heart attack” (46, 70). Tying in with the Big House genre more broadly, Banville’s *Birchwood* is reminiscent of earlier novels such as Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800) that “establishes the conventions of an enduring literary genre: the neglected house as symbol of family and class degeneration”. However, the agent of degradation in *Birchwood* cannot be limited to neglect, but rather to wilful, villainous destruction, much as in the Gothic iteration of the Big House novel (Kreilkamp 62). The process of ageing is not left to the arrow of time but hijacked and accelerated by the novel’s villain: Gabriel’s long-lost twin brother, Michael, born of an incestuous arrangement between Gabriel’s Papa and Papa’s sister, Martha (Gabriel’s *de facto* aunt).

Where Gabriel has been domesticated in spite of his incestuous conception, the arrival of the “mad cold brother” born “of the misalliance between brother and sister” (168–9) invites other readings of the novel. First, the violence done to the aged Granda and Granny Godkin can no longer be considered innocent: it is part of the malevolent narrative that leads

to Michael's taking over Birchwood, even when he is the *de facto* illegitimate son having been brought up by his mother, Martha, out of wedlock (Gabriel is the due inheritor of the estate). Youth therefore trumps age. Second, we can consider Gabriel and Michael the twins of Einstein's famous paradox. In the second section of the novel, Gabriel goes on a journey with the circus, away from and then returning to Birchwood. Michael, meanwhile, thought lost when his mother dies mid-novel, has actually stayed in his initial "frame of reference" at Birchwood the entire time.

The twins have therefore lived and aged separately, as though in separate spacetimes.⁴ It should thus be expected that the travelling twin, Gabriel, has aged less. However, the opposite has happened. First there is Michael, whose "fearsome set of teeth" do not appear to have degraded by the novel's close. Gabriel describes how Michael "looked up at me with terrible teeth clenched in a grimace" and that "He had not changed. His red hair was as violent as ever, his teeth as terrible" (32, 165, 167); Michael has not aged in accordance with Einstein's theory. The second reversal of the idea of time dilation is evident in the state of *Birchwood*. Gabriel notes that "The house was [now] in better repair, and eyed the world through its blazing windows with a steely new assurance, and there were new slates on the roof, and the garden was elegantly barbered" (161). Time dilation, then, appears to have been reversed within the novel's narrative, upsetting the model of Einstein's theory of special relativity and subverting the traditional mode of narrative following Eddington's arrow of time.⁵ This word "subversion" is important when discussing *Birchwood* (Kreilkamp 75; McMinn 32), and there appears to be an obsession with subversion in *Birchwood*, particularly if we think of it relating to time and time dilation.

For example, the novel's beginning is the end of its narrative, with Gabriel's decision to tell his story through flashback. The idea of the past being "poised around me" (4) at the start of Gabriel's narrative confirms the novel's analeptic narrative structure. The first sign that this constitutes a subversive act is Gabriel's "I am, therefore I think", reversing René Descartes' famous dictum. Gabriel then reveals that the story is of the "fall and rise of Birchwood", another phrasal reversal, this time hinting at Edward Gibbons's eighteenth-century tome on the Roman Empire. "The name is Godkin, Gabriel," the narrator continues, telling us that "I feel I have already lived for a century and more". He also asks: "[W]hat, for instance, did I do in the womb [...] with my past time still all before me?" Without answering, Gabriel goes on to claim impossibly that "In my time I have gone down twice to the same river", and, before the first page is out, he explains that "I have begun to work on the house. Not that it is in need of repair, no" (3). Even cause and effect – corollaries of entropy and the Arrow of Time – are subverted, such as when Gabriel attempts to conclude narrative strands that have yet to begin and describes the photograph of a "young girl dressed in white" whom he had thought, later in the novel (though earlier in time), to be his long-lost sister. Now, however, at the end of his *fabula*, "I knew this girl was someone else, a lost child, misplaced in time" (4–5). This, I propose, is how to think about Gabriel and Michael, identical twins whose lives were divided from their very beginning: children lost in time. Time's subversion may therefore appear inevitable.

In response to Gabriel's Proustian subversion when he describes gathering his "madeleines [...] anew, [and] compared them to my memories of them" (5), Gabriel becomes for Rüdiger Imhof (1987) a blueprint for Banville's later "Einstein figure" (113) Gabriel Swan in *Mefisto* (1986).⁶ Not only do both Gabriels seek "meaning, harmony, [and] order" (126) in the world, but they tell their stories in narratively similar ways: like Godkin, Swan "tries to

discern sense and meaning in his life through the manner in which he recounts it in retrospect” (114). The youthful experience of subverted time is thus privileged in *Birchwood* because it allows Godkin to establish narrative order. For Godkin, however, the subverted past that lays the ground for the future is contingent since, first, “all we carry into the future are fragments which reconstruct a wholly illusory past” (4), and second, “the past comes back transformed only to startle us with its steadfastness. It is our fractured vision which has transformed it” (161). The latter reminds us that not only is our experience of time relative, but our relative position in time and space is an active agent of the experience of time. The combination of youth and Einstein’s theory of special relativity make an interesting cocktail in *Birchwood*.

The subversion of time in *Birchwood* does not occur outside the effects of the narrative or characters. Clearly, the malevolent twin, Michael, is the narrative interloper⁷ whose actions subvert temporality in *Birchwood*: ageing takes place horizontally *across spacetime*, rather than vertically *through chronological time* as we might expect with ageing in a Big House novel. This adulterated temporal structure is also signalled in “one of the novel’s most haunting symbols, [...] the eponymous birchwood” (McMinn 35): “Our wood was one of nature’s cripples. [...] The trees grew wicked and deformed, some of them so terribly twisted that they crawled horizontally across the hill, [...] The roots they had struggled to put down were thrust up again[.]” (B 23) The horizontal branches and the upturned roots provide an apt metaphor for the problem with ageing that Gabriel himself undergoes. The “existential schizophrenia” (McMinn 39) that Gabriel experiences when he realises that his twin brother exists helps to explain the “mad” world “with laws cast in the wrong moulds” (B 26). Gabriel’s feeling of expedited ageing – “more than a century” (3) – emerges and becomes explicable because of his twin, and because of the logic of Einstein’s theory of the twin in his models of spacetime and special relativity. As such, rather than instantiating them the interloper Michael resolves (or at least makes possible to resolve) the narrative’s temporal contradictions that result in the restoration of the authority of youth at Birchwood.

Hints at the horizontal dilation of time were already present in the relative differences between Birchwood and the travelling circus, and their respective frames of reference. Eleanor Lybeck’s (2019) argument that “The circus [...] is a way of seeing in *Birchwood* and less a spectacle in itself” (138) confirms that it is worth reading this twins narrative through the idea of Einstein’s thought experiments about the nature of simultaneous, yet relative observation. The twins paradox and its associated notion of spacetime additionally helps to make sense of the temporal subversion and Gabriel’s attempt at seeking order and meaning *in spite* of the subversion, and in light of his disregard for aged figures and their atavistic authority. Michael, therefore, was not the problem but provided the meaningful solution. Wilfully or not, Gabriel’s space and its relative time have altered counter to the expected motion of spacetime because of Michael. He is the Einsteinian solution to the problem that atavism and an ageing authority posed all along to Gabriel’s own existence, demonstrating Banville’s predilection at this stage for Einstein’s temporal model.

Doctor Copernicus

When confronted with ageing, a signal problem is the feeling of running out of time. That fear is ironised when what you need time *for* is time itself. This is true in *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), when the eponymous protagonist tries to inaugurate the heliocentric view of the universe by establishing the length of the orbits of other planets and therefore the varied

length of a year in our solar system. In an early version of “clock time”, Copernicus is in a race to finish his work and publish his calculations before either he dies, or someone else gets there first. However, this race to avoid death is felt not by Copernicus himself, but rather by those around him. Moving beyond *Birchwood's* youthful exuberance, in *Doctor Copernicus* the hero develops an authentic embrace of his ageing and coming death.

Copernicus' ageing is first told to the reader through the letters of eminent priests. Canon Tiedemann Giese writes that Copernicus “is an old man now, & in ill-health. He does not sleep well, & is plagued by hallucinations: sometimes he speaks of dark figures that hide in the corners of his room”. Giese later defends Copernicus from malicious rumours, citing “his advanced age & his neverending studies”. Meanwhile Copernicus is also aware of his own ageing when he comments in a letter to Giese that he is “touched, truly” by his housekeeper Anna Schilling's “devotion to an old sick man” (150, 152, 155). In these examples there is a sense of genuine anticipatory resoluteness, to use Heidegger's phrase. In gerontology, this has been termed “gerotranscendence”: “The gerotranscendent individual [...] typically experiences a redefinition of the self and of relationships to others and a new understanding of fundamental, existential questions.” (Torstnam cited in Ingman, 2018: 4) Copernicus knows he will die and is readily committing himself to it. He appears, in his own words and those of Giese, to be what Heidegger would term an authentic Dasein, preparing for death.

However, that preparation frustrates a visiting scholar from Wittenberg, Rheticus. Rheticus narrates the penultimate section of the novel as he meets Copernicus and organises to have the latter's proofs published (Copernicus earlier published a preparatory thesis, promising a fuller explanation later). Rheticus' frustration is not restricted to Copernicus' ageing, but Copernicus' gerotranscendent *acceptance* of his ageing:

“When you have once seen the chaos, you must make some thing to set between yourself and that terrible sight; and so you make a mirror, thinking that in it shall be reflected the reality of the world; but then you understand that the mirror reflects only appearances, and that reality is somewhere else, off behind the mirror; and you remember that behind the dark mirror there is only the chaos.”

Dark dark dark.

I said:

“And yet, Herr Doctor, the truth must be revealed.”

“Truth is that which cannot be concealed.”

“You have not listened, you have not understood.”

“Truth is certain good, that's all I know.”

“I am an old man, and you make me weary.”

“Give your agreement then, and let me go.”

“The mirror is cracking! listen! do you hear it?” (209)

Here Copernicus reveals his Bergsonian persuasion by *intuiting* his Duration, simultaneously relinquishing his claim to authenticity over the work itself, dismissing it as a “mirror”. Where Gabriel Godkin sought order like Rheticus, Copernicus notes the mirror's cracking. When Copernicus implores Rheticus to look beyond the mirror that “reflects only appearances”, Copernicus reveals that he has recognised his Duration as the inevitable, eternally mobile flow of time. Added to this gerotranscendence and Copernicus' contingent place in the world (“The shortness of life [...] allow[s] us to know but little”), is Copernicus' embarrassment of

his work: “First they shall laugh, and later weep” (209). Here Copernicus owns his guilt as much as his temporality, showing that he appears to be the authentic Dasein that Heidegger describes. Of guilt, Heidegger (2008) says that “*Being-guilty* is more primordial than any *knowledge* about it” and gives rise to conscience since “The call” into Being “is the call of care” (332). And Copernicus’s “care” in the world is to right the wrongs of the Ancient map of the heavens by virtue of a new, more accurate science – and even to acknowledge his theory’s faults when they appear.

The call to care demands truth, as both Rheticus and Copernicus agree in the discussion quoted above. And yet, the “truth” that Copernicus has written – “more than I had hoped [for],” says Rheticus (181) – is not to be published under Copernicus’s name. Instead, Rheticus is coerced into “writ[ing] down an account of the book from memory”, in order that Copernicus can destroy his own copy and that Rheticus, though far younger and considered a disciple of sorts, can become “a kind of John the Baptist, the one who goes before” (187). Thus, refusing to sign his own name and himself into immortality allows Copernicus to commit himself authentically to death: “[W]ith the help of friends and enemies, he achieved the legendary status he had worked so carefully to avoid” (McMinn 47). At the same time, Rheticus, the younger, fails while overtaking Copernicus in the race to immortality; or, as McMinn explains, “Copernicus was a failure who, through the intervention of others, became a legend” (*ibid. ibidem.*). And yet, John the Baptist does not rise again, unlike Jesus – here analogised with Copernicus. Ageing, therefore, leads to a kind of immortality via the assumption of an authentic Being-toward-death. To take the analogy one step further, Rheticus gained no “such fame” as Copernicus’, even though it was his work (B 187).

Thus, Rheticus’ inauthentic Being-toward-death results in his broad omission from history and confirms the fruitlessness of worrying about ageing. Copernicus has thus discovered a “good way of signing” by “writ[ing] things that, finally, are things, worthy of going without [his] signature”, thereby perfecting the strategy of making the signature “remain and disappear at the same time, remain in order to disappear, or disappear in order to remain” (Derrida 34, 56) – this is Banville’s Copernicus’ anti-ageing writing strategy that I read as a development of Banville’s attempt in *Birchwood* to see order in the chaotic Big House by virtue of Einstein’s twins paradox. To write in *Copernicus*, therefore, is to write into immortality; to sign, by contrast, is to claim that work inauthentically as your own. Copernicus appears to have worked out that the *work undertaken* (his taking-care) is sufficient to live authentically, whilst on the other hand, Rheticus discovers that signing one’s name does not ensure immortality, his becoming instead an inauthentic life. In the time that remains to Rheticus in *Doctor Copernicus* as he ages, he does not undergo “gerotranscendence” and therefore remains inauthentic. Youth is beginning to be superseded by the ageing and aged characters.

The Infinities

In *The Infinities* the ageist and gerotranscendent ideas deployed in *Birchwood* and *Doctor Copernicus* find a new outlet in the immortal storytelling – and puppeteering – of the god Hermes, whose anti-ageing system elides with the author’s own. Hermes’ narration relies on understanding both Einstein’s and Bergson’s ideas of time. I have already shown how *The Infinities* navigates between the two poles of time as sketched by Bergson and Einstein. The novel concerns the rapid ageing and dying of old Adam Godley, father to young Adam and Petra, and husband to Ursula. Importantly, “The universe in which *The Infinities* takes place [...] is not our own” (Murray 13) since, among other oddities, old Adam Godley has supplanted

Einstein's theories of relativity and other theories of quantum physics. For Godley, now comatose following a near-fatal stroke, there has always been a competition between temporalities, evident in the ways that Petra and young Adam oscillate between Einsteinian temporal paradoxes and Bergsonian Duration, as I quoted above.

In the final pages of the novel old Adam is (just about) returned to life. When he is, immortal god Hermes describes the mortal world

where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where they may live, however briefly, however tenuously, in the failing evening of the self, solitary and at the same time together somehow here in this place, dying as they may be and yet fixed for ever in a luminous, unending instant.
(300)

Not only does this description again conjoin the self–world–others relationship, but Hermes' description allows for the ideas of the “unending instant” of Einstein's spacetime and Bergson's Duration “where all is accounted for” on a personal level, “while yet the [worldly] mystery of things is preserved”. The same tensions accounted for through Banville's earlier work are here restated, albeit now from an immortal's perspective.

Hermes envies the mortals' world, though he admits its failings. For immortals, two things defy experience: “[L]ove [...] is one of that pair of things our kind may not experience, the other being, obviously, death.” This is no source of happiness for the immortals, claims Hermes, who instead proclaims that “of course [Zeus] wants to die, as do all of us immortals” (72–3). The immortals plainly are not Beings-toward-death in the Heideggerian sense, and in fact the temporalities on which Heidegger draws – either Bergson's or Einstein's – are inapplicable to the world of the immortals. Moreover, the limited temporalities of Dasein are desirable to immortals.

However, the most important intervention in the mode of living-through-time in *The Infinities* comes from old Adam. As he lies in bed, physically immobile and able only to think on his memories, he laments that “dear life is what I could never quite get the hang of”. By contrast, “Others seem to manage it easily enough: they just do it, or have it done to them – perhaps that is the secret, not so much to live as be lived, let life itself do the work” (217). This reversion to the passive voice turns “to live” into a deponent form, in which it sets aside its activity and turns the human agent into the object of the action. “To be lived” leads inexorably on to “to be aged” and, more problematically, “to be died”. This is a paradigmatic version of Heidegger's inauthenticity in which Dasein's thrownness into the world is rejected, and a passive existence substitutes for the authentic, anticipatory resoluteness of Dasein – old Adam's behaviour is reminiscent of Rheticus in *Doctor Copernicus*.

This collocation of ideas leaves *The Infinities* in a paradox: Hermes promotes Bergsonian and Einsteinian temporalities, on which Heidegger drew, but its hero old Adam rejects Heidegger's central conceit of thrownness and authentically being-toward-death. This paradox is central to Banville's creative production. The novel he longed to see in 1985 would contain “a new poetic intensity, once the form is freed of its obligations to psychologize, to spin yarns, to portray ‘reality’” (Banville, 1985. para. 22). The motif of ageing, as I have charted it, thus reaches in *The Infinities* a non-real portrayal – Hedwig Schwall (2010) has helpfully explored the text's fantasy credentials – when living itself is displaced into passivity, even while time itself maintains its twentieth-century tensions. It makes sense that *The Infinities*

is this novel, given its adjustments of political and scientific history (Mary, Queen of Scots has decapitated her cousin Elizabeth; old Adam Godley has supplanted Einstein's theories of relativity and other theories of quantum physics). These tensions, whilst never resolved, continue to hold sway in *The Infinities*, while there is increased pressure from *outside* these hermetic systems – another paradox.

And yet through Hermes' "prestidigitation" (75, and cf. Schwall, 1997) the god points us towards the best understanding of this outside-time-ness as ordinary, the "to be lived" as normal. In positioning and animating the marionettes – and delaying dawn, manipulating the flow of time itself (29)– Hermes is, like the author, both inside and outside the narrative. A novel is a closed system, with front and back covers. But unlike the arrow of time that demands unidirectional time, Banville's closed systems abide by their own laws of time's arrow. It is the ageing within the covers that abides by the logic of that novel, rather than the universal temporalities applied to, and emerging from, Dasein more generally. Hermes-as-prestidigitator is but a version of Banville, his characters "marionettes in Banville's puppet theatre" (O'Connell 152), thereby establishing a new type of a closed, Hermetic system: in *The Infinities* "time is all out of kilter" (194). Unlike the thought experiment of Schrödinger's cat that "says that we cannot investigate darkness by bathing it in light" (Banville, 1985. para. 17), Hermes sheds light on the temporal forces at work in Arden House and further develops the anti-ageing writing system in the Godleys' home that circumscribes the "achrony or temporal utopia in which the comatose Adam finds himself" (Schwall 2010 100); in doing so, Hermes relieves ageing of its inevitability. The novel ends by returning life to Helen's womb, and (just about) returning old Adam from death's door to the world of the living.

* * *

In *Birchwood* I explained how the horizontal time dilation resolved the problem of atavism and the inauthentic Dasein for the protagonist. In *Doctor Copernicus* I showed the inauthenticity that derives for Rheticus from wishing to expedite another's ageing – that is, playing god to another's Dasein – whilst in *The Infinities* I counteracted that by showing how the author–prestidigitator reveals himself by reversing or forestalling the process of ageing, rather than by expediting it. Of all the characters in Banville's novels, Hermes in *The Infinities* reveals himself as the most authentic (quasi-)Dasein because he actively wills death, even though (or *because*) it is absolutely unavailable to him. From outside mortal temporality, he seeks mortality and becomes therefore authentic – even as he reverses ageing in the mortal characters under his control. To reverse others' ageing is the closest he gets to expediting his own. Thus, Gabriel Godkin time travels within a mode of Einstein's temporality, Copernicus embraces his Duration's flow through time and Hermes controls the flow of time in either direction, proving that Duration is at his whim. I therefore argue that the growing bid to slow and to reverse time's flow in Banville's novels proves the author's increased interest in Bergson over and above Einstein.

Notes

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2 Etymologically, “atavism” invokes the relation of the grandfather, rather than the father.

3 See *The Newton Letter* (1982), in which the inhabitants of the land are the Lawlesses – presumably descendants of those in *Birchwood*.

4 I am treating Einstein’s theories metaphorically here, rather than suggesting that Banville is conducting a science experiment in *Birchwood*.

5 The most notable subversions of Eddington’s arrow of time are Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* (1991) and Christopher Nolan’s film *Memento* (2000).

6 See Kersti Tarien Powell in this issue on the importance of Einstein to Banville’s stop–start development of *Mefisto*.

7 In this idea of the interloper, I am referring to the *Long Lankin* interlopers that featured in Banville’s short-story collection *Long Lankin* (1970; revd 1984).

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